

Arc 1 - Chapter 69 - The Storm II

Upon reaching the forest's perimeter, Thea, Karania, and Desmond cautiously parted the dense foliage to take in the view. Their eyes widened collectively as the landscape, that was about to turn into their most hard-fought battlefield in just a matter of hours, unfurled before them.

Peering out from their covert alcove in the underbrush, Thea's gaze stretched across a four-kilometre expanse that once must have been a natural haven—verdant fields, towering trees, lush grasslands.

Now, it had been transformed into an ashen wasteland, the land scorched and blackened, devoid of any semblance of life.

It was a bleak tableau, a meticulously crafted killing field designed for one grim purpose: To soak up the blood of the UHF marines who would soon emerge from the Azure Forest and charge toward the city.

The Stellar Republic had eradicated any potential cover, leaving not a single place to hide in the entire expanse. The message was clear: This would be a battleground without quarter, a place where survival was anything but guaranteed.

Beyond this barren expanse rose the formidable outer walls of Nova Tertius. So immense were these fortifications that they not only overshadowed the scorched wasteland in front of them but also concealed the city's towering skyscrapers. These structures, which Thea had been able to catch glimpses of when she first landed on Nova Serene, were now eclipsed entirely by the wall's overwhelming presence.

Constructed from layers of reinforced rock-crete and positively littered with further reinforcements of massive layers of plasteel, the walls seemed almost to merge with the horizon, rising like an insurmountable barrier between them and their objective.

The wall was further bristling with a terrifying array of defences—emplacement after emplacement of heavy weaponry, the ominous silhouettes of sniper nests, anti-air batteries and other various wartime fortifications. Every square metre appeared to be a well-calculated vantage point, designed to unleash hellish firepower on any who dared approach.

The sheer density of these defensive configurations gave the impression of a fortress that had been preparing for this moment for a very long time, ready to repel invaders with a ferocity that could turn even the most daring strategies into suicide missions.

It was the chilling proof of the lengths the Stellar Republic would go to defend this city and Nova Serene as a whole, and for the first time, the magnitude of the challenge they were about to face became palpably real for Thea.

Overwhelmed by the scale of the defences before her, Thea felt a momentary flicker of insignificance.

Yet, she quickly shook off the encroaching dread, narrowing her focus as she summoned the depths of her extraordinary Perception.

She took slow, deep breaths to centre herself, shutting out extraneous senses to zero in on the intricate details spread across the war zone before her. Like adjusting the lens of a high-powered scope, her Perception sharpened and refined, cutting through the haze of distance and atmosphere to paint a vivid tableau of the enemy's positions.

In that hyper-focused state, individual turrets, bunkers, and fortifications sprang into crystalline clarity. She took mental snapshots of the locations of heavy artillery pieces, anti-aircraft guns, and sniper nests perched like predatory birds along the towering walls.

Her eyes caught the reflective glint of what could be optical sensors or even cameras—something to note for Desmond, who might be able to hack into them.

She catalogued patterns, like the rotation speed of a heavy machine gun turret or the intervals at which guards patrolled a certain stretch, all potentially useful data for timing their assault.

With each captured detail, the initial feeling of insignificance began to fade, replaced by a burgeoning sense of responsibility.

Here, in this heightened state of perception, she found her role, her contribution to the impending chaos—a scout's finely honed ability to read the battlefield in ways others couldn't.

She knew that the intelligence she was gathering was likely insignificant in the grand scheme of things, but it could potentially make a crucial difference for Sovereign Alpha, giving them the smallest of edges in a battle of unimaginable scale.

At some point, she even unholstered her Gram, utilising its high-powered scope to scrutinise particular sections of the fortifications more closely. Her aim was to ensure that every sliver of intel she collected would provide actionable insights for Corvus and other nearby squad leaders.

The scope's crosshairs danced over various points of interest, allowing her to confirm or fine-tune her earlier observations.

However, as she continued this meticulous exercise, Thea had to confront an uncomfortable truth: The volume of information she was accumulating was overwhelming, too dense and complex to be easily communicated or acted upon.

The staggering enormity of the fortifications defied concise description, exceeding the bandwidth of what could be practically conveyed.

The reality was inescapable: They were facing the daunting outskirts of a mega-city transformed into a bastion virtually immune to assault, surrounded by a blasted wasteland designed expressly to be a killing field.

'How the absolute fuck are we even supposed to get out of the forest, much less cross this massive expanse of death? I really hope Venn knows what he's doing, for the sake of all of us...' Thea couldn't help but think, as she holstered her Gram again, readying herself to get back and report her findings—as much as she could, at least.

However, just as she was preparing to signal Karania and Desmond to retreat back to their staging area, a fleeting glint of light captured her attention.

As Thea's eyes tracked the source of the fleeting glint, her gaze was inexorably drawn upward, far above the towering walls of Nova Tertius and the scorched earth that stretched before it.

What she saw unfolding in the sky above took her breath away: A massive space battle was raging over the expanse of Nova Serene, just past the planet's exosphere.

She had utterly forgotten that such a colossal clash was even happening, having lost sight of the sky since the day they first touched down—a day that was notably devoid of any such combat, as the space battles had only commenced roughly 48 hours after their initial landing.

Even through the atmospheric haze, the bright gleam of the sun, and the wisps of clouds, the spectacle was overwhelmingly grand.

Streaks of light lanced through the void, the telltale signs of high-heat projectiles racing through the vacuum towards their target. Brilliant flashes illuminated the distant battle, each one marking the demise of a vessel or the detonation of powerful munitions.

Tiny clouds of specks darted around—presumably smaller fighter craft engaging in their own skirmishes—but they were so dwarfed by the mammoth capital ships that they seemed like gnats buzzing around titans.

Though they were likely thousands of kilometres apart from each other and even farther from the planet's surface, the gargantuan dreadnoughts seemed almost within reach of each other to Thea, as if she could stretch out her arm and brush the cold metal of their hulls if she were on board of one of them.

These leviathans of space looked less like ships and more like floating citadels, each bristling with an array of devastating weaponry that could turn entire moons into rubble.

From her point of view, their slow-motion engagements resembled a celestial ballet of titans, choreographed in the vacuum of space. Yet, each seemingly graceful movement was loaded with a destructive power that defied comprehension.

The enormous turrets on their exteriors pivoted lethargically, aligning with targets before discharging bursts of energy so potent they appeared as miniature suns, even from this great distance. Shockwaves of released energy pulsed outward, creating ripples that Thea imagined could tear through the fabric of space itself.

Each time one of these bursts connected, the target ship would erupt in a dazzling fireball of light, a silent, distant spectacle that belied the unimaginable devastation wrecked by the unfathomably large weapons used in the space conflict.

The scale was so monumental that it downright distorted her own sense of time and space.

What seemed to her like a slow unfolding of intricate moves was, in reality, a high-stakes clash where even a millisecond's delay could result in the obliteration of thousands.

Though they appeared to move with a deceptive slowness, these massive ships were actually locked in a high-velocity, lethal dance that was far beyond Thea's comprehension. Their movements seemed paradoxical—simultaneously fast and slow, like a ballet unfolding at both a snail's pace and the speed of light.

According to Thea's understanding of space warfare, the timing between a shot being fired and its eventual impact could span dozens of seconds or even minutes.

These dreadnoughts, though seemingly slow on a galactic scale, were actually darting through space at speeds that defied belief for short-range engagements like this one. By the time enemy projectiles reached their target coordinates, the targeted ships had often already shifted position or adjusted their angles, rendering a large portion of incoming fire irrelevant.

Space combat was less about delivering a single, decisive blow and more about creating a series of dilemmas for the enemy, forcing them to make split-second choices that could spell their doom.

This strategic intricacy explained the battle's ongoing ferocity, despite the fact that it must have been waging for well over a week by now. The combatants were engaged in a relentless, high-stakes game of cosmic chess, where every move was calculated to force the enemy into a difficult decision, rather than to checkmate them outright.

Yet, despite their apparent speeds, from Thea's limited, ground-based perspective, they looked like gods of old locked in a cosmic duel, their every motion an epic saga written against the backdrop of the stars with painful slowness.

The sheer magnitude of what she was witnessing made all her detailed observations of Nova Tertius, as intricate and vital as they were, seem almost inconsequential.

Realising the stakes of her immediate mission, Thea managed to wrench her attention away from the awe-inspiring tableau in the sky.

In the grand scheme dictated by System-sanctioned Battlefields, the outcome of the space battle, monumental as it might be, could become irrelevant if they succeeded on the ground first. According to the rules of engagement, victory in either theatre would tip the balance entirely.

The System, as it seemed, had no interest in prolonging death and destruction needlessly.

As such, refocusing on the task at hand was essential.

With a quick, snapping gesture, she caught the attention of Karania and Desmond, both of whom appeared to be just as transfixed by the skyward spectacle as she had been. Their faces, marked by awe and perhaps a bit of dread, shifted back into expressions of purpose.

"Let's move," she signalled quietly, careful to not attract any undue attention.

Leading them back through the now-identified perimeter of the Stellar Republic's SADD, she felt a renewed sense of urgency. Regardless of the drama unfolding among the stars above them, their mission here and now was no less crucial.

They retreated from the edge of the forest, every step taking them further from the ashen wasteland and its fortified behemoth, but closer to the reality of the battle that awaited them— a battle they had no choice but to win...

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Two hours after their reconnaissance, Thea had finished briefing Corvus on every nuance she had observed. With meticulous attention to detail, Corvus had synthesised her insights into a comprehensive report which he promptly relayed to Staff-Sergeant Venn and the other squad leaders in their vicinity.

The information, potentially rich in tactical implications, was now theirs to dissect and incorporate into their plans, if they chose to do so.

Back at their makeshift encampment in the depths of the Azure Forest, Thea and the rest of Sovereign Alpha had gathered together, their preparations for the looming battle already complete.

The atmosphere was a cocktail of quiet determination, anticipation, and a tension so palpable it felt like a living entity. The conversation among them was light but avoided the impending conflict, as if speaking it aloud would make it all the more real.

No one was under any illusion; they were collectively bracing for an engagement that promised to be gruelling in ways they had never experienced.

The sheer magnitude of the task ahead was underscored just an hour prior when a sizable crate arrived, delivered courtesy of the UHF logistics department. It was packed not only with ammunition but also with an astonishing amount of medical supplies.

One glance at the extensive medical inventory was enough to gauge the grim expectations of the UHF's high command. It was a telling sign, especially given that all of these supplies were designated for a single squad medic—Karanja.

The abundance of medical gear seemed to echo a haunting question: Just how dire would this battle become?

Thea couldn't shake off a persistent concern for Karania, her closest friend and the squad's indispensable medic. Karania's near-compulsive need to save lives was both one of her greatest strengths and vulnerabilities alike.

Now, armed with a staggering supply of stims, bandages, and other medical gear, Thea knew Karania would throw herself into the melee, working tirelessly, likely without rest or respite.

Watching Karania meticulously reorganise her already massive backpack, Thea found herself lost in thought.

The medic had emptied out its contents entirely, prioritising the medical supplies they had just received from UHF. The backpack now appeared to be a portable hospital, specifically curated for the horrors they'd inevitably face during the siege.

'I'll just have to make sure nobody can surprise her,' Thea resolved internally, vowing to protect Karania from any unexpected dangers that could catch her off-guard while she was immersed in her life saving mission.

Still, Karania's earlier words echoed in her mind, words spoken the moment she'd seen the abundance of supplies at their disposal: "If they're providing this many meds, there's no reason I can't be generous with them and save as many as I can, right?"

Her tone had been a mix of determination and a hint of grim optimism, as if challenging the bleak circumstances they found themselves in. It was a statement that encapsulated Karania's approach to any battlefield—her resolve to bend the terrible odds in their favour, one life at a time.

It wasn't just Karania who had overhauled her equipment; almost every member of Sovereign Alpha had taken the opportunity to reconfigure their loadouts in preparation for the daunting battle ahead.

Isabella and Lucas had practically gutted their backpacks to make room for munitions.

Isabella's pack brimmed with belts of ammunition for her colossal rotary machine gun, Devastation, each cartridge meticulously aligned and ready for rapid deployment. Lucas had followed suit, stuffing his bag to the point of bursting with the standardised 50mm grenades for his Havoc launcher.

Both had a singular focus: Ensuring they would never run low on ammunition, no matter how protracted the battle became.

As for Thea, she had exercised a different kind of caution.

She'd tripled the number of capacitor mags for her Gram, each one carefully tucked away in easy-to-reach rockets inside of her large backpack. A few extra magazines for her Caliburn were also stowed away, "just in case".

She had pondered the idea of adding more grenades or extra magazines for her Icicle, especially since the crate had surprisingly included the specialised ammunition it required.

But after weighing the odds, she'd decided against it.

The calculus was simple: It was improbable she'd find herself in a situation where those additional supplies would tip the scales, or she'd even be in-range to use them.

The opportunity for another resupply at the patrol base had been fresh in her mind as a fallback plan, allowing for last-minute adjustments before the mission proper, when they would enter Nova Tertius itself.

As such, Thea had made a mental promise to herself to add an extra magazine or two for her Icicle once they ventured into the labyrinthine cityscape itself. The Icicle's unique penetrative capabilities were unparalleled in her arsenal, except, of course, by the Caliburn.

Given the complexities of urban warfare, that specific feature was bound to be a game-changer more than just a few times.

Amidst a natural lull in conversation and the ambient quiet that had enveloped their hideout, a distinctive set of footsteps broke through Thea's focus. It was Corvus, their squad leader, approaching from the direction of the makeshift command post.

Given that the sky was now awash with the hues of late afternoon bleeding into early evening, there was only one logical conclusion for his emergence from the prolonged tactical meetings with the other squad leaders and UHF command: It was time.

Thea, sensing Corvus's approach well before the others, gestured for her squad to brace themselves. She took a final moment to secure her own gear, her senses razor-sharp.

Moments later, Corvus rounded the bend of the trench they occupied, his eyes locked onto each of theirs as he began to speak, seeing that they were all aware of his presence already.

"Listen up, we're on the clock. You've all been prepping, but give your gear one last once-over. Trust me, you'll want to. What we're stepping into is like nothing we've ever seen. We're away from the eye of the storm, but don't let that fool you—this is still going to be bad," Corvus's voice was unyielding, gripping their attention.

"If you're still hanging onto memories of the 'large-scale' ambushes we faced on Day One, it's time to recalibrate. We're talking about an operation featuring around 60,000 T1 marines as part of our wing alone. Add to that more than 500 armoured vehicles and thousands of their operators. By the day's end, respawn pods will be so jammed, some marines won't be back in the fight for weeks."

His gaze intensified, "For us, for other Alpha Squads in the assessment, and the special infiltration squads that will follow and help us get into the city proper before splitting off, we've got a separate respawn pod. If you go down, you're back in action quicker than the rest. That's the good news."

Corvus's tone grew gravely serious, "But once we're inside the city, if you die, you're stuck behind the wall. No respawn pods are getting through that wall. So inside that city, every step is a gamble with your life. Be vigilant. Be sharp."

He paused, letting the weight of his words settle, "You've got ten minutes to finish your prep. After that, I want you geared up, locked in, and ready to make Sovereign Alpha the pride of both the Sovereign and the UHF as a whole. Oo-Rah?"

A resounding "Oo-Rah!" erupted in unison, reverberating through the atmosphere.

Isabella's grin broke free, not just in response to Corvus's stirring words but also as a mark of personal pride. The "Oo-Rah" had been her contribution, a tradition she'd carried over from her mercenary days, and hearing it echo from the mouths of her new squad within the UHF was a validation she couldn't help but enjoy.

Ten minutes later, Sovereign Alpha had assembled in their usual formation: Thea took point, her keen perception a vital asset for detecting incoming threats. Just behind her stood Lucas, his Stalwart shield at the ready to provide her with immediate cover if necessary. Following closely behind were Isabella, Karania, and Corvus, each focused and prepared for the mission ahead. Bringing up the rear was Desmond, his eyes glued to his wrist-mounted drone display.

Desmond had already dispatched two of his drones.

One was programmed to hover above the squad, offering an aerial perspective of their surroundings. Though its usefulness was somewhat limited by the dense canopy of the Azure Forest, its capabilities would become indispensable once they emerged into the open terrain in front of the city.

The second drone was under Desmond's direct control, sent to reconnoitre the forest's edge and offer another glimpse at the imposing wall that marked the boundary between the UHF-controlled area of the Azure Forest and the Stellar Republic's Nova Tertius.

As they traversed the uneven terrain, following the deep grooves left in the earth by half a dozen vehicles that had rolled past their patrol base earlier, Corvus's voice broke through the squad comms.

"Double-check your hearing protection. It's about to get loud. We're going in."

Heeding his warning, Thea quickly inspected the seals on her helmet.

She had donned the full-face mask of her Spectre armour before they'd set out, keenly aware that she didn't want to be caught off guard during the ensuing chaos of what promised to be a frenetic firefight. Satisfied that her helmet was securely sealed and her auditory shielding was cranked to its highest setting, she refocused on the mission at hand.

Just as she glimpsed the tail end of one of the armoured vehicles through the curtain of foliage ahead, its powerful engine roared to life. The vehicle surged forward, effortlessly mowing down the intervening shrubs, undergrowth, and smaller trees as it carved a path out of the Azure Forest and into the desolate, ashy expanse beyond.

Thea felt her breath catch in her throat as she watched the first of the behemoths emerge from the treeline.

One was a medium-type, tread-based colossus, its front equipped with two immense shields arranged in a V-formation. Next to this mechanical monstrosity, Lucas' Stalwart shield seemed like a children's toy's toy in comparison.

The other vehicle was a medium-type, anti-grav one, its upper surface bristling with two enormous rotary Gatling guns that looked like they could chew through a building in a fraction of a second.

Her heart pounded as she observed them cross the boundary where the Stellar Republic's SADD ended. This was the point of no return, and the weight of what they were about to undertake settled upon her like a cloak.

The SADD was more than just a protective barrier, after all—it was a double-edged sword.

Programmed to keep out unauthorised attacks, it also acted as a deterrent to anything leaving its confines of the same nature.

This meant that while the UHF forces were sheltered within the Azure Forest, outside the range of the Stellar Republic's SADD, they were safe from artillery strikes. The Stellar Republic would have to compromise the SADD to launch any form of heavy attack, thereby making their own territory vulnerable as well.

But crossing into the territory governed by the SADD was akin to stepping out from behind an impenetrable shield and into the open.

No longer outside the protective umbrella of the defence dome, they were now fair game for artillery fire from the Stellar Republic. And the enemy wouldn't have to guess their position either; the very act of crossing the SADD's boundary would pinpoint their location with chilling accuracy.

After all, the Stellar Republic knew the exact circumference of their own SADD's dome.

Ten seconds after the vehicles had entered the SADD's influence, the air around them erupted into a downright deafening cacophony.

The anti-grav vehicle mounted with the massive rotary gatling guns roared to life, and the sky above them was suddenly ablaze. Tracer rounds streaked upward, creating rivulets of crimson and gold against the deepening dusk, resembling fireflies on steroids.

And it wasn't just the one vehicle.

Along the entire length of the UHF's formation, dozens upon dozens of similar anti-grav platforms lit up the sky with their own devastating salvos of unrelenting tracer-fire.

The noise was beyond overwhelming, a relentless, pulsating hum that shook the ground and reverberated through their bones. It sounded as if the heavens themselves were tearing open, a ceaseless storm of mechanical thunder.

Thea's hearing protection strained against the sonic onslaught, trying it's absolute best to keep her eardrum intact, but the sensation still permeated every fibre of her being, making her teeth rattle in her skull.

All this was choreographed to an awe-inspiring visual spectacle.

As the vehicles trudged forward, unperturbed by the chaos they were instigating, the tracer rounds met the incoming artillery shells from the Stellar Republic.

When they collided in mid-air, they blossomed into dazzling explosions that punctuated the evening sky. The atmosphere was filled with bursts of light and fire, as though the stars themselves had descended to partake in this hellish dance of destruction.

What had moments ago been a tranquil twilight was now a frenzied tableau of flashing ordnance and shattering artillery.

The evening sky was so choked with the pyrotechnical roses of war that it effectively blotted out all natural light, plunging the land below into an eerie, fluctuating pseudo-night in a matter of seconds as shrapnel and left-over pieces of ordnance rained down like a torrential downpour.

Sovereign Alpha, along with the rest of the nearby UHF forces, were momentarily privy to observing this spectacle. However, they were merely waiting, heart pounding in adrenaline-fueled anticipation, for the call to charge into this maelstrom.

They knew that the wall of vehicles was moving to create a modicum of cover, a fragile shield behind which they could advance. But even as they waited, gazing into this hellish panorama, it was a sobering reminder that they were stepping into a battlefield from which there might be no return.

As if on cue, the towering fortifications of the Stellar Republic's wall roared to life as well.

Blazing beams of light, torrents of shells, and trails of missiles erupted from emplaced turrets and gun batteries, answering the UHF's audacious incursion into the SADD's zone. The already chaotic soundscape was compounded even further by the whizzing of projectiles and the thunderclap roars of heavy ordnance from the wall's defences.

Simultaneously, a caravan of UHF armour rolled defiantly into the SADD's expanse.

Anti-grav tanks levitated above the ground, their turrets swivelling to find their marks and unloading high-explosive shells one after another, while tread-tanks bulldozed forward, their tracks grinding the earth beneath them before firing off their own highly deadly projectiles.

A host of other heavily armoured weaponry, everything from mobile artillery units to missile platforms, joined the fray behind them. In an awe-inspiring display of firepower, they unleashed their own torrent of ordnance onto the Stellar Republic's towering wall.

For those watching from the ground, the scene was nothing short of apocalyptic.

Shells and rounds from both sides raced towards each other, detonating in bright flashes of destruction upon impact, sending shockwaves of energy through the air.

In mere seconds, the stretch of no man's land between the UHF's encroaching line and the Stellar Republic's bulwark was transformed into an even more unrecognisable wasteland.

The layers of ash that had been mostly uniform just seconds ago, were replaced by massive craters and scorched earth, while plumes of fire and smoke billowed into the atmosphere.

The visual spectacle was staggering; laser beams seared through the air, leaving glowing trails, while incendiary rounds erupted in blossoms of crimson and orange, further sullyng the dusk.

The collective roar of all this activity was deafening—even through state-of-the-art hearing protection. It was a thunderous, discordant symphony of warfare, punctuated by the cacophonous blasts and resonant echoes that seemed to shake the very sky.

This was it—the battle for Nova Tertius had commenced.

In those first few seconds, the initial strikes had set the tone for the brutal confrontation that was unfolding. The scale of the devastation wrought on both sides in just the first few seconds was downright incomprehensible, yet this battle had only just begun.

This reality only became more apparent, when the command channel on everybody's comms clicked to life and a few simple, yet momentous words were spoken by Legate Kuan, that signified their imminent charge onto the battlefield.

"Marines, get us into Nova Tertius."